

CHAPTER 12

George Washington's Unique 1792 Pattern in Gold

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The unique 13 Star gold pattern of 1792 bearing Washington's portrait presents many interesting problems to the numismatist. Designed and coined before the April 2, 1792 Mint Act was passed and before construction of the first Federal minting facilities in Philadelphia, it would be the earliest gold pattern for a proposed United States coinage. It is the purpose of this study to argue that the gold coin was a gift to Washington, as President, as part of a sales promotion of a private English manufacturer toward obtaining a contract to strike U.S. coins. Copper patterns from the same pair of dies were submitted to the officials in charge of planning U.S. coinage.



1792 Washington President 13 Star Pattern in gold

Associated Pieces

There are several types and varieties of 1792 Washington bust patterns for United States coinage.

(A) There are 1792 patterns in silver and copper with the obverse legend, G. WASHINGTON PRESIDENT I, made by Peter Getz of Lancaster, Pa., and struck in Philadelphia. The uniformed bust of Washington faces left. One reverse has a small eagle and 15 stars in the field,

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1792 G. Washington President I pattern

while the other has a large eagle without stars in the field. None of the pieces bear a denomination on either face or the edge, but the size (diameter 33 mm.) has resulted in them being accepted as half dollar patterns. They are referred to as Getz patterns (Baker 23, 24 and 25).

(B) The 1792 pattern in copper with the undraped bust of Washington in Roman style facing right does not have the initial representing Washington's first name nor the presidential succession Roman numeral I at the end of the obverse legend. The reverse has six stars and bears the denomination CENT. The dies for the piece were cut by John Gregory Hancock of Birmingham, England and struck there by Obediah Westwood. These pieces are referred to as Roman bust patterns (Baker 19).

(C) The 1792 patterns in gold, silver, and copper with a uniformed bust of Washington facing left were prepared from the same device punch used to cut the 1791 WASHINGTON PRESIDENT copper ONE CENT patterns. There is no initial before the name and no numeral at the end of the obverse legend. There are two similar obverse dies. The reverse has 13 stars above the eagle, and there is a ribbon in the eagle's beak, bearing the motto UNUM E PLURIBUS. There is no denomination on either face or on the edge. The dies were also cut by John Gregory Hancock and struck by Obediah Westwood at Birmingham just as were the 1791 pieces. To distinguish these 1792 patterns from all others, they are referred to as the 13 Star patterns (Baker 20 and 21). The gold pattern featured in this article is this variety and has a 17.3 specific gravity. Its horizontal diameter is 32 mm., vertical diameter 31 mm. The copper patterns have a diameter of 30.5 mm., these differences resulting from striking them without a collar.

(D) The 1792 pieces in copper with a reverse bearing a legend of Washington's official offices (Baker 59) instead of an eagle are more in the nature of medals than patterns for coinage, as Crosby agreed, even though the obverse is the same as that on the 13 Star patterns above described.

(E) No other pieces with bust of Washington bear the 1792 date.

Design & Denomination

The design and legend on the 13 Star gold pattern of 1792 was not in full conformity with the legislation submitted to the Senate on Dec. 21, 1791, and approved by that body on Jan. 12, 1792. The bill provided for "an impression or representation of the head of the President of the United States for the time being, . . . his initial . . . his surname at length, the succession of the Presidency numerically and the year of the coinage." The initial and the numerical succession were not on the 13 Star patterns, but all requirements were met in the Getz pattern. This would indicate that the 13 Star pattern was prepared in 1791 and postdated 1792 to compensate for delays in transport from England and in submittal.

In the House of Representatives on March 24, 1792, John Page, a friend of Washington from Virginia, spearheaded a rejection of the personalization of the President in the legend and design and this apparently would not have been done contrary to Washington's wishes. By April 2, 1792, the law establishing the U.S. Mint was fully enacted and all design elements relating to the President had been eliminated.

It can be observed that the 13-Star pattern of 1792 not only has no de-



1791 Washington Large and Small Eagle Cent patterns

nomination but has no space on either face for a denomination, yet both varieties of the 1791 WASHINGTON PRESIDENT pieces previously made by the same maker have the denomination of ONE CENT in the legend. The Roman bust pattern of 1792 also contains the word CENT. This leads to the speculation that the 13-Star patterns of 1792 might have been made in a manner to be used as a cent if made in copper, as a half dollar if made in silver, and as an eagle if made in gold. It was also possible that the denomination could be placed on the edge of the coins in the manner subsequently adopted for the first U.S. half cents, cents, half dollars, and dollars, or not placed on the coin at all as was done in the first U.S. half-dimes, dimes, quarters, quarter eagles, half eagles, and eagles.

Even though some of the 13 Star patterns including the one in gold had UNITED STATES OF AMERICA recessed on the edge, most had plain edges. The weights of the 13 Star patterns do not throw any light on the matter as the gold pattern weighs 251.5 grains (the first U.S. eagle weighs 270), the silver pattern weighs 187 grains (the first U.S. half dollar weighs 208), and the copper pattern weighs 180 grains (the first U.S. cent weighs 208). In making only one in gold, about four in silver, and 10 to 15 in copper, no intent as to denomination can be ascertained from the weights or the quantities produced.

Actually the Birmingham coiners must have been seeking a copper coinage contract because of the profit opportunities. To coin precious metals required a full intrinsic value of gold or silver and therefore little or no profit for the coiner. In addition, the risk of loss in shipping gold or silver coin or bullion would be increased by its coining in England and the danger of seizure while in England was a further hazard. Obediah Westwood had never had a gold or silver coinage contract from anyone because he was in the copper coining business. There was no attempt to sell machinery to, or make only dies for, the United States as that would not have required special samples. On the other hand, the intrinsic value in copper coins would amount to about half of the circulating value and the coiners could take advantage of their improved coining machinery to make a substantial profit and to share some of that profit with the United States.

It therefore seems logical to conclude that the 13 Star patterns of 1792 were for one cent copper pieces and not for half dollars as many writers have suggested with reservations. It must have been a follow-up of the 1791 patterns in copper which were definitely for a copper cent. The elimination of a stated denomination on the coin merely followed the then existing English practice of not putting a denomination on coin.

The conclusion that 13 Star patterns of 1792 were patterns for cents throws new light on the gold piece and on the silver pieces. It indicates that the precious metal pieces were for special presentation rather than as

examples of the product to be sold.

Evidence As To Presentation Practices

The modern evidence located in the papers of Matthew Boulton in the Birmingham Assay Office as to presentation procedures was published in 1931 and shows the practice of a coinage contractor to present specimens of coinage to the top official of the United States. Boulton had written a treatise on copper coinage and had developed new steam powered machinery for coinage at his Soho manufactory in Birmingham. In his letter dated Nov. 25, 1789 to John H. Mitchell of Charleston, S.C., he stated, "Please to take a copy for yourself of my Paper upon Copper Coinage and then present it and also some of my Specimens, and my most respectful Complts. to the truly great & Hon'ble George Washington."

The second piece of modern evidence of presentation practices was located by Robert W. Julian about 1962 when he published "The Digges Letters."

Thomas Digges, an American-born freight operator living in England, had occasion to investigate who was negotiating with the United States when the 1791 Washington President cents were being promoted for sale to the United States. He learned that the coins were sent to the United States in an effort by William and Alexander Walker of Birmingham to obtain the coinage contract. Their partner in Philadelphia was Thomas Ketland. The Walkers told Digges that several hundred weight (of the 1791 coins) "had been sent to America and given to the President & other public gent'n." Digges communicated this to Thomas Jefferson in a March 10, 1793 letter. This evidence reaffirms the practice of presenting the President of the United States with examples of specimen coinage.

To reinforce further the position that George Washington received the gold piece, it would be logical to conclude that if Washington was to receive the customary specimen of a proposed coinage, he would have been given the gold one rather than one of a less important metal. It would have been poor public relations not to give him the most outstanding and valuable specimen. The fact that the patterns for cents were made in silver and gold as well as copper would indicate a purpose for making them in precious metals.

The 13 Star pattern in gold has gentle wear on both sides. The high portions of the shoulders and hair on the obverse and of the shield and eagle's legs on the reverse show smoothness from contact with other coins or from use. The gold piece could not have circulated. It did not have the correct weight for any denomination. It had no fineness indicated by its legend or any issuer to stand behind it.

Similarity to 1785 Immune Columbia Patterns

There is a direct comparison to be made between the 1785 Immune Columbia-Nova Constellatio patterns and the 1792 Washington 13 Star patterns. The Immune Columbia pieces were also made in gold, silver, and copper. They are the same size as the coppers which were in circulation in the United States in 1785. The 1792 Washington 13 Star patterns were larger than the 1785 Immune Columbia pieces because after 1789 in America as well as in England the public insisted on more copper in copper coin to represent the same calculating value as theretofore. No one has ever suggested that the Immune Columbia patterns were for other than a copper coinage. The United States in 1785 primarily needed a copper coinage and there was competition for it. The result was the Fugio cent copper coinage contract let in 1787.

There is one 1785 Immune Columbia pattern in gold (see Appendix), several in silver, and a larger quantity in copper. This is an identical presentation procedure as was later used in the 1792 Washington 13 Star coinage. It must have been a salesmanship practice in the solicitation of copper coinage contracts and the single gold pattern, the few silver patterns, and the larger amount of copper patterns are obvious parallelisms in both situations.

A Contrary Opinion

A recent challenge to the position that the 1792 Washington 13 Star pieces were patterns only for copper coins was published by John J. Ford, *Num* 1975, pp. 1939-49. In that interesting article he asserted that the coiners were prepared to strike coins in any or all of the three metals, namely gold, silver, and copper. He suggested that it could have been considered practical to use the same pair of dies to strike coins in each of the three metals, thus producing three denominations of exactly the same diameter. He referred to the 1792 Washington President 13 Star pieces in gold, silver, and copper as "multidenominational patterns" and then stated that they were presumably struck as a "small scale speculative issue."

Differences of opinion in numismatic matters are not unusual where the facts are not fully available. However, the thought that the United States would issue coins of the same design and diameter, distinguished as to denomination by the metal from which they are made, requires that certain major problems of such a proposed practice be pointed out. The extra care required to make and receive payments would be unusually burdensome, particularly under oil and candle light. The plating of copper

pieces to pass as higher denominations would be too dangerous and too easy.

The punch linking of the 1791 Washington President Cent coinage in copper with the 1792 Washington President 13 Star patterns, coupled with the fact that both are the same diameter, seems to undermine the theory that a gold or silver coinage contract was being sought.

Presumption of a "small scale speculative issue" does not seem justified when (1) a reference is made to the same pieces as patterns; (2) there are no denominational legends, no weight legend, no indicated fineness, and therefore no possibility of circulation; and (3) the quantity made was so insignificant that each of the pieces is an American numismatic rarity.

Owners and Their Comments

Gustavus Adolphus Myers (1801-69) of Richmond, Virginia, was an antiquarian and one of the founders of the Virginia Historical Society in 1831. By 1855 he owned the gold 13 Star pattern of 1792 and wanted to learn more about its background. In that year he wrote a letter, which was published with an answer in *Notes and Queries* (London, Vol. 12, p. 203):

I have a gold coin in my possession, a rough sketch of which I enclose; and which, although much worn, is still of the full value of the American eagle, namely, ten dollars. On inquiring at the United States' Mint, in Philadelphia, a few years since, I found that, in the collection there of specimens of all the federal coins, none like this existed. It attracted much curiosity; but nothing of its history could be learned. A very intelligent officer of the institution informed me, that he conjectured it was stamped in Birmingham. The name of Washington President, appearing upon it, renders it an object of greater interest; as it is generally understood, and believed, that while that distinguished man was president of the United States, learning that a coinage was about to be stamped at the mint, bearing his effigy, he immediately arrested the proceeding. A few copper coins had however been struck, which were never issued; and which I believe are still preserved in the collection to which I have above referred. No gold or silver coin of the same stamp was ever struck in the United States of America. The coin in my possession was evidently intended for circulation. Its style of execution is rather rough, and the motto upon the scroll in the eagle's beak, "Unum e pluribus," is not correct: that upon the federal money having been, "E pluribus unum." If you can through any of your readers, afford me any information touching the subject of my inquiry,

you will greatly oblige G. A. Myers, Richmond, Virginia (U.S.A.)

This American piece was struck at Birmingham by Hancock, an engraver of considerable talent. Of these pieces there are several varieties: one, without date on the obverse; on reverse, American eagle, shield on breast, olive branch in one claw, arrows in the other; above, stars, cloud, and "ONE CENT", edge, "UNITED STATES OF AMERICA;" below, "1791." Another, date under head, "1791;" reverse, eagle as above, but larger; in beak a scroll, "UNUM E PLURIBUS;" above "ONE CENT;" no stars, cloud, or date. Another profile of Washington to the right, fillet round the head, no dress; legend as above; date "1792;" reverse, eagle with shield olive and arrows; above "CENT." Edges of all the same. These are all of copper, and were said to have been patterns for an intended coinage, but not approved.)

It can be pointed out that there is an important inaccuracy in the above inquiry in that Mr. Myers asserts that the Washington gold pattern had the "full value of the American eagle." There had been a weight reduction of the eagle in 1834 from 270 to 258 grains so that the comparison was inapplicable.

Myers gave the gold pattern to his close friend, Mendes L. Cohen (1796-1879) of Baltimore as evidenced by a handwritten entry in Cohen's copy of the Mickley sale catalogue. Cohen retired at age 33 to travel and collect antiquities. At the age of 79, Cohen sold his coin collection through Bangs Merwin & Co., New York, Oct. 25-29, 1875. The Washington 1792 pattern in gold constituted lot No. 1488 and was described by Edward Cogan in the catalog as follows:

1792 Ob. Head to left, Washington President. Rev. Spread Eagle with scroll. "Unum E. Pluribus." 13 stars over head. United States of America, on the edge.

This is in Gold and one of the most interesting pieces ever offered to American collectors, and as no other piece has ever been heard of, in this Metal, it is as fairly entitled to be called unique as any other coin that can be named. In the absence of any positive history connected with this piece I think it was most probably struck in compliment to General Washington and no other in Gold was allowed to be issued. It was possibly used for some time as a pocket piece which would account for the evidence of slight circulation it exhibits. Be this as it may it will be invaluable to any one collecting Washington Coins or Medals.

The June 1882 *Mason's Coin Collector's Magazine* carried an an-

nouncement that the 1792 gold piece was for sale for \$500. At this time Lorin G. Parmelee probably acquired it. When the Parmelee collection was sold at auction on June 25, 1890, the gold piece (Lot 618) was featured by being illustrated on the cover of the catalogue and on Plate 11, indicating its stellar position among quantities of great American rarities. For the provenance, the catalogue stated, "It is very probable that Washington had this piece given him and the slight wear it shows would indicate its use as a pocket piece."

Harlan P. Smith (1838–1902) and David Proskey (1858–1928), as the New York Coin & Stamp Co., ran the sale. Smith was a vigorous collector and bought the gold piece for \$220. Carl Wurtzbach in a letter to Burdette G. Johnson in 1943 stated that he knew Smith had owned the Washington 13 Star patterns of 1792 in gold, silver and copper.

However, when the Smith collection was sold in 1906 by the Chapmans, none of those pieces was included. Who owned it or secreted it for the next 20 years is a mystery. If it had been for sale, Waldo Newcomer (1866–1934) of Baltimore, Virgil Brand (1866–1926) of Chicago, or John W. Garrett (1872–1942) of Baltimore, would have been eager buyers. Walter Breen stated that Brand was an owner (*Numismatic News*, Nov. 27, 1973), but there is no record of it in Brand's acquisition and inventory book.

In any event Wayte Raymond sold it to Edward H. R. Green of Round Hill, Mass., in the 1925–30 period. After the death of Hetty Green's famous son, the gold piece was sold through B. G. Johnson in 1941 and is still privately held.

Appendix

I stated above that there is only one 1785 Immune Columbia in gold. It should be pointed out that another one appeared about 1957. The original 1785 Immune Columbia in gold was documented in 1843 when it became part of the U.S. Mint Cabinet; it is now in the Smithsonian Institution.

The piece appearing in 1957 has on the obverse what appears to be a die break from the border to the scales. This apparent die break is in the identical position as a planchet defect on a previously known 1785 Immune Columbia in copper. The planchet defect on the copper piece is a thin metal split or lift, the opening being visible on the edge and the separation continuing to the scales. The defect has no relationship to the die and no other theretofore known piece in any metal has any trace of a die break in that area. The gold piece appearing in 1957 has other charac-

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The 1792 Washington President in gold was apparently purchased at private sale by Waldo C Newcomer as it appears as item 2761 in Mehl's list of the Newcomer collection prepared about 1937. Altho its metallic content is not mentioned it is XF, unique and valued then at \$1,500. Chapman traces it to 1858 and says it is unique.

Mehl sold the Newcomer Colonials to Wayne Raymond and only a few went to Garrett.



Immune Columbia Forgery

teristics peculiar to the defective planchet copper piece such as corrosion spots, which appear only on that copper piece and in the same location. This leads to the conclusion that an obverse intaglio die for the gold piece appearing in 1957 was made by the electrotyping process from the copper Immune Columbia obverse which had the planchet defect and the corrosion spots. The Columbia/Nova Constellatio reverse of the Immune Columbia gold piece appearing in 1957 is not the same reverse die variety as that on the original Immune Columbia gold piece. The variety of the reverse of the gold piece appearing in 1957 was the same as another previously known Nova Constellatio die variety and has been modified slightly by polishing. It may be concluded therefore that an intaglio die was similarly prepared by the electrotyping process for the reverse. There are also other silver and copper Immune Columbia-Nova Constellatio pieces which first made their appearance about 1957.

In the editions of Yeoman's *Guide Book* from 1947 through 1959 the 1785 Immune Columbia piece in gold is described as "unique"; in the editions from 1960 through 1968 this comment was changed to "2 known"; and in the editions from 1969 to date the comment has been changed to "extremely rare". In Taxay's *Comprehensive Catalogue*, the 1785 Immune Columbia in gold is described as "unique" and there is no mention of the Immune Columbia gold piece which appeared about 1957. Taxay and others had carefully studied the 1785 Immune Columbia gold piece appearing in 1957 before the preparation of the first edition, and Taxay determined not to include it.